

MIGRATION STUDIES: SOME OBSERVATIONS ABOUT THEORY

by Leonard Plotnicov

Like virtue, good anthropological work should be its own reward. The present collection of papers amply justifies its existence by this maxim, but questions and problems raised by the individual papers and the symposium that provided the setting for these contributions in migration studies imply that more than the bare production of these papers is required. Implicit is the notion that these efforts should be important steps toward the formulation of some analytical framework for the anthropological understanding of migration. It is not my intention here to argue that these papers are worthy studies in their own right, though I indeed regard them so; rather, I wish to suggest that the quest for some unified theory of migration is tantamount to a search for El Dorado. My aim is to dissuade those who would invest their energy in what I believe is a fruitless effort.

Accordingly, I have grouped the papers into two types: those which inform us of processes and conditions that are tangentially or peripherally related to migration, and those which attempt to develop theory and methodology by focusing on the phenomenon itself. Not all the papers fall neatly into one or the other category, to be sure, and some fit with equal ease into both. The point of this division is only to illustrate some of the issues to be examined below. Examples of the former category include the papers by Linda Whiteford, Robin Shoemaker, Peter Tobias, Scott Whiteford, and Michael Whiteford. The papers of the latter category—those which seek the intrinsic or essential nature of migration—instruct us more pointedly than do those of the first group about the obstacles that lie between us and the ultimate goal of formulating migration theory. Let us consider these.

Douglas Uzzell tells us at the outset of his paper that the conventional anthropological conceptualizations of migration are artifacts of the imagination that bear little resemblance to the Mexican experience, and hence are of dubious heuristic utility. Similarly, many of the other con-

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tributions report a variety of methodological difficulties experienced in formulating suitable units of analysis. It is curious, however, that despite the unrewarding efforts the hope continues to be held that the complexities of migration situations may eventually be contained within formal models.

Less optimistic is Sylvia Forman,¹ who describes her frustrations in attempting to apply conventional analytical concepts of migration to her research and how she ultimately emerged disillusioned. Robin Shoemaker presents a similar personal account of how a customary research approach failed to yield satisfactory insights into his observations of Peruvian peasant rural-to-rural movement. His research underwent a remarkable metamorphosis, rejecting an initial focus on migration *per se* in favor of the challenging notion that the study of migration is not to study migration at all, but to investigate its causes and effects.² Important for Shoemaker are concepts such as internal colonialism and the "structural contradictions of underdevelopment."

The editors of this volume elsewhere comment on the strengths of the papers individually and collectively; I will therefore limit my remarks to some of the problems the papers themselves raise—and some that I add—which question the feasibility of seeking a unified theory of migration. In itself, migration seems simple enough. Some people who grow up in one place later go to live or work in another. But what seems simple on the surface becomes confusing and muddled when we scratch deeper.

For example, it is fair to ask who should be excluded from the category of migrants. Shall we exclude the chronic travelers, the nomads? In that case, we could eliminate from traditional societies the Romany Gypsies and the Sea Gypsies of southern China and Southeast Asia. After all, we sense that migration involves some starting point or some ending point or both. Although pastoral nomads meet this requirement, we might still exclude them because their cyclical movements require arbitrary demarcations between start and finish. Intuitively, however, we sense that something more important inclines us to ignore nomads and gypsies when considering migration. I think it is because they do not meet an implicit requirement of migration studies—that the migrants must be a part of a process of social and cultural change. And it is by this requirement that we do accept as important for consideration another kind of cyclical movement, that of seasonal migratory labor, contract laborers, and target workers. For in most, if not all, of these cases a traditional social system has been disrupted by drawing a previously insulated people into an international orbit of large-scale political and economic arrangements. Cyclical labor migration often anticipates emigration. Thus, whether by convention or necessity, migra-

tion studies are an adjunct of studies of socio-cultural change, and migration studies are interesting and important precisely because of the role migration plays in the dynamics of change.

Granting this, we must still face the issue of which conditions in the past and in the present that resemble migration are legitimately within the purview of migration studies, and which may be excluded. Most of us would agree that recent examples of large-scale population movements, like those described in the present volume, satisfy the condition of being part of a process of profound social change. Other recent examples include the settling of European immigrants in certain African countries, Australia and New Zealand, Canada, the United States, and Latin American countries. But the further back into history we go, the less inclined we are to accept as appropriate to the interests of migration studies phenomena of the same sort, even when they are of large scale and are produced by, or themselves produce, radical social disturbances. As illustrations, consider the following examples: the American colonization of Alaska, Cherokee and other American Indian resettlement in the United States, the movement of indentured labor from Europe and Asia to the Western Hemisphere, the shipment of millions of Africans to New World plantations as slave labor, the settlement of the Pilgrims in Massachusetts, Sir Walter Raleigh's planting of colonists in Ireland, Bantu expansion in tropical Africa, Athapaskan relocation from Alaska to the southwestern United States, Aztec relocation from the American Southwest to central Mexico, the Celtic and Germanic migrations in Europe, and the dispersion into North America by Upper Paleolithic Siberians. Where do we draw the line? If we exclude cases of major population movements from the historic or remote past because they provide insufficient data or because the examples fall within the province of other scholars, then to that extent we remove from consideration the comparative materials essential to the development of a unified theoretical framework.

Discriminating between who is and who is not a migrant becomes easier when we apply the criteria of significance and scale. Thus, guests who come to supper and fail to leave, tourists who turn into expatriates, traders, missionaries, and Peace Corps workers conveniently may be dismissed. (Certainly they are not discarded from consideration because some of these types neither wish nor consider themselves to be migrants; there are sufficient examples of involuntary relocation to make volitional mobility irrelevant.)

But other examples are less easily dealt with. What do we make of the senior-citizen retirement communities that have become firmly established in southern California, Arizona, and Florida? Do they not consist of migrants? Are not tourists increasingly like migrants, insofar as the scale,

the social and economic impact in areas of tourism, and the amount of time devoted to being a tourist are great and growing? Some sections of the contemporary American population spend so much time at tourism that they have come to resemble transhumant nomads.

Perhaps we should restrict the label of migrant to peasants and primitives because otherwise we shall have to include corporation executives and their families, artists, professionals, skilled industrial technicians, and (deliver us) academics. Who among us is not by one measure or another a migrant? Seen from this perspective one is tempted to wonder whether there is not something deviant about people who stay put.

I wish it were possible to have something like a theory of migration. During informal discussion at the San Francisco symposium, Tony Leeds declared that a theory of migration can never be attained if one assumes that there is something essential to all examples of migration, and there is no such essence. But I still wish it were possible because I am curious about modern society and I think such a theory, if it could explain the differences between historical and contemporary migration, would provide further insight into modern conditions. The difference is that the abnormal of the past is the normal of the present. Under normal conditions no one in his right mind would consider leaving a traditional community, except with the prospect of an advantageous return. But that was yesterday. Today, we have the consequences of Horace Greeley's advice: Madison Avenue is populated with midwesterners. Migration in Bicentennial America is as American as McDonald's English muffins.

These remarks are intended to go beyond merely pointing out the difficulties inherent in developing migration theory from studies of migration, and to suggest that a theoretical framework that cannot define its units of analysis with precision and rigor is no theoretical framework. Giving a name to something like "migration theory" or "urban system" does not guarantee its empirical reality. When analytical concepts cannot tolerably accommodate reality, a deficiency which the present collection of papers indicates, the fact should alert us to the possibility that we are operating within a false field. Regardless of what terminologies are employed to conceal its nature, a false field is capable of generating only false field theories which, in the end, are only false theories.

The baby does not have to be thrown out with the bath water, however. In addition to their merit as solid pieces of research, the symposium papers demonstrate two encouraging characteristics. First, they fully justify the symposium's title and show how rich in variety new approaches to the study of migration may be. Second, in doing so they indicate, in my opinion, that migration studies, when interesting and significant, do not stand alone, but enrich our understanding (empirically

and analytically) by being associated with a related phenomenon. This is why we enjoy the Grenadian gossip described by Tobias and why we appreciate more fully the importance of participant observation in field work through his efforts and those of Linda Whiteford in her concentration on natural language. This second characteristic suggests that migration studies are important as a means of understanding something else. The productive studies of migration are those which have been successfully married. They are the hyphenated studies of migration-cum-something else, and the fruit of this union is the reason for our appreciation of this gathering of good anthropological work.

NOTES

1. My remarks are addressed to Forman's oral presentation at San Francisco. Her revised paper, which I received after this was written, omits the personal style of the earlier version. It is gratifying to see that we have independently reached similar conclusions.

2. I believe Scott Whiteford holds a similar opinion when he says, early in his paper, that migration may be viewed as a symptom of "the context of social change from which it is generated and to which it contributes." The key word here is "symptom."